

CALVIN AS A SCHOLAR.

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VII.

The educational advantages enjoyed by Calvin were exceptionally fine. From first to last he had the advantage of the best schools and the best teachers. As we have seen, his mind was precociously developed and extremely keen. At a time of life when most men are only shedding their mental nest-feathers, he had attained full maturity and ripe scholarship. Latin was to him, as to most scholars of his day, even more familiar than his mother-tongue. None of the other Reformers approached him in the classic use of the Latin language, with the exception of Melancthon, who perhaps excelled him. But the latter's training had been entirely along humanistic lines. Calvin "moves in Latin with elegance and grace and breathes forth his thoughts in harmony with the language." He evidently thinks in it and everywhere proves his perfect familiarity with the classics; although there is no evidence of the fact that he read Cicero through once per year, as some of his admirers said. His language is less ornate, crisper, terser than that of Cicero. If he modelled after any one, it was after Seneca.

His own native French is greatly indebted to him. The French introduction to the first edition of the "Institutes" is called "an epistle worthy of a great king." French critics have freely admitted the great formative influence which Calvin exerted over their language. Shortly after his death, Pasquier wrote: "Our French tongue owes him endlessly much. A number of the most beautiful terms and of the finest expressions, which are now used, descend to us from Calvin." Bos-suet acknowledges that he—"wrote French as well as any of his age." Sayous admits that: "The extent and the swift development of his influence on our tongue is quite inestimable, the modern syntax of French largely dates from him."

As an indication of his precociousness, we may mention that he wrote his commentary on Seneca's—"De Clementia"—when he was a boy, not yet twenty-three years old, and his "Psychopannychia," a discussion of the sleep of the soul after death, a year later. Of both of these the words are true, which Herzog wrote about the first edition of the "Institutes," when Calvin was twenty-six years old: "it betrays a rare ripeness of mind in so tender a youth."

The two things, to which we point, as indicating the high degree of scholarship of Calvin and his mental resourcefulness are his translation of the Bible and his exegetical work. As regards the first. In the year 1540 two mutually antagonistic forces appeared, which were destined vitally to affect the French Reformation. The one was the establishment of the order of the Jesuits, the other the complete translation of the Scriptures, published under Calvin's name. It was, however, not Calvin's original work. Lefevre had made the start and Robert Olevetan had, in 1534, compared this text of Lefevre with the original Hebrew; especially for the benefit of the Waldensians. Olevetan sent the manuscript to Calvin for correction. The edition of 1540 was Calvin's own revision. Eleven years later a new

effort was made, in which Calvin associated with himself all the learned men about him, notably Beza. This translation was printed by Robert Stephanus, of Geneva, and saw several editions during Calvin's life.

It is, however, not to be compared with the unique work of Luther, and it bears the imprint of too many hands. With Henry and Stahelin we may well mourn the fact that Calvin alone did not undertake the work, to which his rare linguistic talent so peculiarly adapted him. He might have left some other things undone and, by devoting himself, with all his strength, to this work of Bible translation, might have left an enduring monument, overtopping all his other literary labors. He was fully equipped, both for translating the Scriptures and for exegetical work, by his knowledge of the original languages of the Bible and by his keen dogmatic insight into the contents of the Scriptures. Terry calls him "the king of the exegetes" of his time, and who will question the title? And yet the very beginning of this exegetical activity proves his modesty. Read his introduction to his exposition of the epistle to the Romans and see how he places himself and his labors far below Melancthon and Bullinger and Bucer. Posterity judged differently. These first fruits of his exegetical labor appeared in 1539 or 1540, followed by expositions of all the books of the Bible, except Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Esther, Nehemiah, Ezra, Proverbs, Song of Solomon and Revelation. On the latter book he did not write because, in his own words—"he was wholly unable to comprehend the meaning of the very obscure writer of that book, and that it was a question among learned men to whom the authorship should be ascribed."

With all his deep dogmatic convictions, Calvin always approached the Scriptures with the utmost objectivity. He tried to find out and to explain, not what he wanted the Scriptures to say, but what they actually did say. Of course, all his work is not equally good. Thus, for instance, his commentary on the Gospels can not be compared to his work on the Psalms and the Pauline epistles. Here he reaches his full height and sweeps on, in grand sympathy with the deep sayings of the Psalmist and of the Apostle; here he is at his best. His mind was of the Paulinic type and his religious experience found its mirror in the Psalms. The secret of the great success of Calvin as a commentator is his deep love for and unswerving loyalty to the Word of God.

Nearly all his later expository work was cast into the mould of exegetical lectures to the students of the Academy, after this was founded in 1559. The numbers of students attending these lectures were very large, reaching frequently to a thousand or more men. As these students became the preachers of France and of Europe, it is well-nigh inconceivable how great an influence Calvin thus exerted on the Reformation.

This side of his intellectual activity alone would have abundantly entitled him to the name—scholar. To a marvelous industry and painstaking care he added the weight of an erudition which, in itself, made him a marked man among all his contemporaries.

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